

Aligned Staff Engagement Programs Provide Comprehensive Career Support

Practice Overview

Program Name	UNC and Me
Practice	The UNC Chapel Hill SOM brought together previously siloed programs and initiated new programs under a common umbrella, the UNC and Me program, to ensure employees are supported and engaged throughout the employee career life cycle.
Participants	All employees, with particular focus on staff.
Frequency	Continuous throughout the year.
Modality	Combination of in-person and virtual.
Resources	Financial investment from the dean's office, administrative time.

Introduction

UNC and Me is a values-based program designed to build a workplace culture that engages employees and specifically supports staff throughout their career life cycle. Through dedicated financial, programmatic, and full-time staff support from the dean's office, previously siloed programs were integrated and new programs were initiated under the UNC and Me umbrella to create a comprehensive program to support teams across UNC Chapel Hill SOM. This program also aligns with a similar initiative first implemented by the health system UNC Health. While the program includes all school employees, there is an intentional effort to formally acknowledge staff as a part of the institution's engagement strategy.

The program is sponsored by the dean's office and led by Karlina Matthews, MBA, chief financial officer and vice dean for finance and business operations, with initiatives led by Martha Modlin, MBA, senior director of business operations, Patty Saponaro, MS, MBA, director of administrative talent development, and J. Matthew Hawkins, associate director of human resources — and acknowledging that many individuals have played a role in developing and implementing this robust program.

Goals and Objectives

The UNC and Me program aims to improve employee engagement through six key domains:

1. **Welcome Me.** Create a positive and inclusive experience for candidates and new employees.
2. **Develop Me.** Focus on employees' growth, development, and overall experience to train the next generation of leaders.
3. **Engage Me.** Create a sense of belonging and strong cultural identity at UNC Chapel Hill SOM.

4. **Value Me.** Foster a culture where employees feel valued, recognized, and equitably compensated.
5. **Care for Me.** Create an environment that is supportive of employees' well-being and personal safety.
6. **Include Me.** Include the employee voice in action planning.

Promising Practice Overview

The UNC and Me program aligns existing and new employee engagement initiatives under a common umbrella, with each initiative falling into one of the six aspects of employee engagement targeted by the program, as referenced above.

Welcome Me was designed to help new employees feel connected and cared for and to build a cultural identity with the school of medicine. Initiatives under this domain include traditional orientation activities [e.g., Welcome to Carolina New Employee Orientation, SOM New Hire Welcome], the Administrative Executive Transition Program, and the Senior Administrative Leader Academy (SALA) program].

The Administrative Executive Transition Program is offered to all new senior administrative leaders to ensure they have early and consistent exposure to information and people critical to their new role. Each new leader has predetermined meetings with high-level leaders (e.g., administration, finance, HR, research, education), meets with both an ambassador (an experienced peer) and a coach, and is invited to the SALA program. Each new leader also receives results from a survey of invested parties that provides information relevant to their position, including what respondents want them to know and what respondents want to know about the leader.

“We're finding that it's so important for [new leaders] to have another confidential space [with their coach] where they can be vulnerable and they can really share what is difficult for them — what's challenging, what they don't understand, where they might be headed,” said Saponaro.

The SALA program is cohort-based to prepare new leaders for success by offering a common baseline of information and personal resources. All new senior staff leaders attend SALA for 10 monthly sessions that address self-development, technical knowledge, and personal relationships with the goal of helping new leaders feel connected and cared for and developing a strong cultural identity with the UNC Chapel Hill SOM.

Develop Me promotes staff professional development. Initiatives under this domain include staff professional development grants, a coaching academy, a quarterly general professional development program that rotates topics defined by staff, the Pathways Program, and the Executive Assistant Advisory Council.

The 20-person, cohort-based Pathways Program prepares potential leaders for success through eight monthly sessions with content addressing self-development, leadership skills, technical knowledge, and personal relationships. In addition, participants are assigned a mentor and engage in a career counseling session. Individuals are nominated for the program by their leaders.

The Executive Assistant Advisory Council brings together executive assistants who support senior-level leaders across the school to develop relationships and prepare executive assistants for success. The program includes onboarding, professional development, and social activities.

Engage Me promotes staff engagement and creates a sense of belonging within the school. Initiatives under this domain include an Annual Staff Summit, recognition and awards, and an employee engagement survey.

The Annual Staff Summit invites staff to come together to learn, reconnect, and celebrate their amazing and talented teams. All school of medicine staff are invited to attend. The Dean's Performance Awards are a set of awards tied to the school of medicine's strategic plan recognizing work completed by staff in support of the strategic missions. Finally, the SHARE employee engagement survey is conducted in partnership with UNC Health to assess staff engagement and inform engagement action plans.

Value Me fosters a culture where employees feel valued and recognized. Initiatives under this domain include recruitment, retention, and performance bonuses; an expanded holiday program*; and an employee discount program*.

Care for Me includes an employee assistance program*, a work/life and wellness program*, and an annual Wellness Expo*.

**Leveraging existing programs offered through the university.*

Include Me seeks input from staff and includes initiatives such as the Culture, Belonging and Wellness Champions, a schoolwide One UNC Health Journey: Culture Learning Map Activity, and staff advisory groups.

Results and Impact

The biannual SHARE survey provides data used to identify emerging needs and assess how efforts have influenced engagement over time. Recent survey results indicate that employee satisfaction with their workplace has remained consistent at UNC Chapel Hill SOM, while nationally, the data has trended downwards.

Additionally, evaluation data from individual initiatives suggest the programs are valued by participants. For example, data indicate SALA is helping new leaders feel more connected to their peers and the school. Since the SALA program launched in 2022, 91% of participants are still at UNC Chapel Hill SOM.

"[As a participant of SALA], there was never a moment in my first year of my newer position that I did not feel supported. ... I never had a point where I did not know who to call," said Paul Marini, MHA, associate chair for administration in orthopedics.

Similarly, Pathways Program participants found that the initiative is helping future leaders feel more connected to the school. Of the original 20 participants, 90% completed the program, 95% remain at the school and are interested in future leadership roles, and 15% have been promoted.

Similar levels of retention have been observed for participants of the Executive Transitions Onboarding Program; participants have shared that this experience has been superior to their experience when joining prior institutions, and anecdotal data indicate that participants felt supported in their new roles.

Resources Needed

The key to these programs' success was a combination of significant financial investment from the dean's office and leveraging the expertise of the faculty and staff from the school of medicine, university, and health care partners. A significant proportion of the funds are set aside for staff development. Funds also go to the Annual Staff Summit, engagement surveys, and smaller items such as meals and swag for program participants.

Challenges and Lessons Learned

Even after two years of running the events, UNC Chapel Hill SOM still believes the program is in its infancy stage and that it will yield even greater impact on staff over time. The team seeks to continually

improve UNC and Me and shared the following insights for any other institution building out a robust engagement strategy:

- **Don't be afraid to test out new ideas.** It is important to give your idea a try and see what happens.
- **Embrace the low hanging fruit.** Start small. There is a lot that can be done to make staff feel valued for a low cost or by leveraging resources at affiliated health systems or the university.
- **Build it and they will come.** Time is what is important to people. Staff appreciate the investment (e.g., provided lunches), but it is creating the space and time with leaders and the community that draws people in to participate.
- **Consistency builds trust.** Aligned programs demonstrate how the institution values its staff.
- **Leverage the resources you already have.** The team was able to leverage the expertise (people) and programs of both the university and the health system.

Moving Forward

In the future, the UNC and Me team hopes to fill in the gap between SALA (senior leadership) and the Pathways Program (junior leadership) and create an offering for mid-level leadership staff members. Additionally, the team plans to create a program that facilitates career path exploration within the school.

Acknowledgements

This case study is based on an Aug. 1, 2024, interview conducted with Martha Modlin, MBA, senior director of business operations, Karlina Matthews, MBA, chief financial officer and vice dean for finance and business operations, Patty Saponaro, MS, MBA, director of administrative talent development, Paul Marini, MHA, associate chair for administration in the department of orthopedics, and J. Matthew Hawkins, associate director of human resources.

Medical School Statistics

Name of Institution	University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill School of Medicine
Location	Chapel Hill, North Carolina
School Size as of 2023:	
Number of medical students	884 ^{1*}
Number of full-time faculty	2,103 ²
Number of staff	2,840 ³
Public/Private	Public

* Enrollment includes the number of students in medical school, including students on a leave of absence, on Oct. 31 of each year shown. Enrollment does not include students with graduated, dismissed, withdrawn, deceased, never enrolled, completed fifth pathway, did not complete fifth pathway, or degree revoked statuses.

¹Source: AAMC. Student Records System. 2023. <https://www.aamc.org/data-reports/students-residents/report/student-records-system-srs>

²Source: AAMC. *U.S. Medical School Faculty, 2023*. AAMC; 2024.

³Source: University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. HR Data Warehouse. Accessed Oct. 1, 2024.

For more information, contact Amy Smith at amsmith@aamc.org or Carolyn Brayko at cbrayko@aamc.org.